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Last Chance to Save Bulbs

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GARDEN NOTES

LAST CHANCE TO SAVE BULBS

By Dennis Hinkamp

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You may have to get a snow shovel to do it, but the last thing that you can do for your garden this year is dig up any remaining summer bulbs.

Many bulbs are vulnerable to freezing during the winter and may not survive until spring, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist.

The four most popular summer bulbs grown in northern Utah - dahlias, begonias, cannas and gladiolas - aren't really bulbs at all, Goodspeed explains. Technically, they are either rhizomes (canna lily), tubers (begonia and dahlia) or corms (gladiola). Each of these is simply a modified stem similar to a bulb. It's just easier to call them bulbs as a collection of plants.

"In southern climates, many of these plants could be left outside throughout the winter, but here they need to be removed," Goodspeed says. "Dig them from the ground right after the first frost has turned a few of their leaves brown and black. All of these bulbs should be dug before the first heavy freeze."

The easiest way to dig them is to use a garden fork, he says. This tool is just a fancy, shorter pitchfork. Make sure to go deeper than the bulbs are planted. Remove as much of the of the top growth as possible without damaging the bulb and root system. This may mean leaving a 2 to 4 inch top on cannas, while removing most of the top from begonias, dahlias and gladiolas.

Once the plants are dug and trimmed, allow them to dry for about a week, Goodspeed says. One of the keys to successfully storing summer bulbs is to make sure they are dry before putting them away for the winter. This is also a good time to check the health of the bulbs. Discard any that are not firm or that has major blemishes or insect damage.

"Once the plants are dried, knock off the extra soil that is attached to the roots," he adds. "They do not need to be washed because in a few months they will be right back in the soil. Put bulbs in boxes to let them rest. A number of materials can be used as packing to keep them nice and cozy. I like shredded newspaper because it is cheap and not as messy as some other materials. Peat moss, saw dust and even packing Styrofoam can also be used to pack around bulbs."

Although excess moisture causes rotting and other problems, bulbs that are stored without any moisture can dry out and become weakened in our dry homes and climate,

Goodspeed says. You can set a bowl of water on top of the packing material inside the box to raise the humidity. Refill the bowl every month or so. And, at the same time check to see how the bulbs are doing.

Once the box is closed and ready for storage set it in a cool, dark, low-traffic location, such as the garage, basement or storage room, he says. The bulbs can stay there until late March when it is time to wake them from their long winter's nap and begin the process of growing, enjoying and storing all over again.

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